The Border Will Be Soon:

Meditations on the Other Side

Yugoslavia 1995-2000

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Part I

My Hand was Made Strong

1997-98

What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee
What thou lovs't well is thy true heritage
Whose world, or mine or theirs
Or is it of none?
-Ezra Pound, Canto LXXXI

My Hand Was Made Strong
in various voices

I.
My hand was made strong squeezing
the necks of chickens, the blood running
down my forearms like rainbows.

And we stopped, the three of us, in front of every streetlight
reflection of ourselves in shop windows to pose
for virtual pictures of the moment.

Andjela's hip poked into a lingering exhaust.
Her hands squeezed her hips like a lover's clutch.
Ivana arched her lower back into a crescent moon.

I engaged the shutter. And for that 1/60 second, we lived
in an ideal photograph that simultaneously burnt away in fire.
We walked for some time recreating ourselves all over.

The Cyrillic characters throughout town resembled mascara
smears. The neon was bright lipstick on the collar of night,
yet the village was in the air of suckling pig on a spit.

My hand was made strong running fingers through
a daughter's browned hair, curls bound tight by that nervous finger,
curls like an extinct alphabet, the characters resembling

an aerial view of erratic deer trails; made strong brushing
the manes of mules, pulling quills from Argos' muzzle.
As I sucked away deeper into the night. As I sucked away deeper

into the night a hand was made strong on a riverbank,
lifting the long necks of brown bottles to lips across two seas and an ocean.
All I need is a good boat and a good woman. The rainforests

will part like luscious thighs. He said he would sail that fucking boat
across any river if he had to use his palm as an oar and he meant it
even when the sun came up like a bleeding fist that had

beat the hell out of night.

The shores here are no different than the edge of Marat's bathtub.
A draping wet linen furrowing into divisions of land and bodies of water.
A leaf green pall spread over a continent. A hand

was made strong driving a knife through a chest, a spade through crust.
Cigarette to lip, a hand was made strong clutching quill and brush.
There is such ecstasy in the gaze of the wounded. I

have only held a dead multi-colored bird in my hand, beak slightly
open like a sunflower shell. Up until that time I had followed the sun.
Now there are only the subtleties of contrasting light

on the waves of Marat's brown bangs, lulling. I am the man
that painted this picture and row, row, rowed the boat. Gently,
burning dissipates into a thirsty sewer brown, feathered with

traces of your light. As I step back to look at this Balkan city,
half the canvas is enveloped in a pitch sky and both are beautiful.
My personality is not gone; I am at the bank of a river now,

listening to the breath behind a cello. I can't say the rhythm
of breath and bowing are synonymous. Sometimes one heavy exhale
equals at least ten draws over the strings; other times

one draw makes the musician breathless. The only consistency is
the inhale, always at a pause; when the bow stops, the pink of lungs
expand into an internal cumulus dawn. Never

have I heard the exhale at a pause, there is only retention of all that.
A musician must be engaged for fear of being spent. Fear faded color.
A pink bloated belly of a carp is at my feet pushing

back and forth on the leftover wake of barge. My hand
was made strong waving to and fro through the Doppler shift
of a retreating orchestra at moondown. Goodbye to milk

and a thousand adolescent dreams of women with bold fingers
pressing clitorises as if pointing blindly at stars; with eyes closed
there is the painting's infinite vanishing lines of liberation.

II.

Train. We were so hungry. All we had was salted fish.
I was thirsty. At night we licked the frost off of the screws.
We sang songs to our men in the boxcars behind

us who had already been killed. Orchestras devoid of conductors
would soon be assembling themselves into circles to show
each musician was equal. How does everybody feel? More

clarinets said the violinist. No, more violins said the clarinetists.
Play louder goddamnit, no one can hear you. My hand was made strong
drawing spirals—failed attempts at circles—

and sewing birch bark sandals for neglected feet that swelled
like pink lungs. Someone's eyes sought a corner to cautiously see
all that was happening. They -ied back to tell but failed. Don't

you see I need you rock. Wherever I ride there shall be
mountains by my side. Pray louder goddamnit,
no one can hear you.

No one can paint you when you're moving like that. You're moving
like that again. Like a feather at sea. An exaltation of larks. Train.
The cries of birch, divested of opaque gowns like women

undressing. A hand was made strong pushing a spaghetti strap
off the bluff of her shoulder. Divested like chalk from slate.
The air transformed into a thick dust. The grain

no different than that of old photographs. I haven't
cried enough over the absence of the angle of your elbow
in the morning while you sleep. A mortal hand.

In *Pančevo* 2½ families' hands were made strong picking
swollen cherries, *višniacu* from the branches of crowded trees.
Grandmother loved once. She loved a man

as she did a country. 1995. Oh Jugoslavija, Jugoslavija, *wer stehen sie*.
She thinks I may understand, but all I know is language fails.
Her whimper is crystalline. It was heard by a deer

hunter, Mr. Adler, my sixth grade geography teacher
whose greasy hands never got cold. It was in a doe cry after the bullet
missed the heart. Followed erratically. He said,

"I heard a doe cry and gave up the hunt."The blood crescendoed
against the snow. Oh that angry pigment and waveless screams into a void
white. 1939. Oh, Grandmother and that first

penetration of her lover. Crystalline. The elusive body of east,
long legged, and a brief trickle of *vishniac* forever staining linen.
A hand was made strong scrubbing this bedding, wringing it

and beating it on the line in stiff August. She had removed
a piece of lint from the brim of his blue
hat before he left. Kissed him three times.

In the daytime it is very nice and pleasant and even
rather pretty in a wrong-headed sort of way.
The angle of your elbow, drawn from this. Listen,

before I forget, I need to know a couple of things. Do you know
how your grandfather was killed? Did Grandmother get to see the body?
Tell me a little about that. Tell me a lot about that.

III.
A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees
by this world's light. It is when he walks by night
that he stumbles, for he has no light.

My hand was made strong sitting chivalrously defending a king.
I can say it now, that I masturbated once behind a tree
when my commander thought I was shitting.

I squatted and wrapped my left arm around the trunk. My fingers
grasped a crevasse in the thick bark.With my other hand I removed
your picture from my breast pocket and placed it

on the ground between my legs and stared at it. I began.
I stared hard but my eyes wanted to close. I continued,
gritting my teeth all the while. The whimper, I remember.

The dizzying jerk. There we were behind my eyelids, making noise.
But there was only one whimper with no direction. There were tears
and then a Partisan. And then a shot in the heart

after loving a country. My Death. All on that day. *But as soon*
as dusk falls, about 5:30, it is really quite dark, these peculiar
ghostly iridescent lightings come on here

and they're making very bright places and leaving dark ominous
ones and a dry smoky mist appears, like in the back of a pool hall.
A hand was made strong. My hand was made strong.

IV.
Grandmother, 1997: I'm going to shit in the middle of the floor
and you all can sit and smell it. I can't wait till they leave.
Nobody wants them here.

If you have to ask your grandmother, then do. If there is anything
she repeats when telling please let me know about that also.
I need to finish this poem.

This morning all was reduced to talk. The writings became sounds
as the deer faltered over fences and mascara ran down a cheek
to the corner of a mouth. Love sounded

like a rock being dropped into water.
And for me, memory was a song sung
in a language I didn't comprehend.

I can't wait until they leave. I can't wait until the angles lose
their edges and my mother loves me at the bank of a river,
skipping rocks until the moon comes down. Until the angles. Rebecca's

hand was made strong skipping flat stones off the surface
of water ripples running together spiraling on two dimensions to shore.
Andjela, your round hip; Milovan, your round hip. The lip

of a tub. The tub an open scream, an unvoiced "O". How deep is the water.

V.
About your poetry, I am not really talking to my granny these days,
because she made curse atme and tell me I am not her granddaughter
anymore and she will dig my eyes and my nose out.

She apologized tomorrow morning but I couldn't forgive her.
That hurt tremendously me.

And all the places (or trgs *they're called here) fill with people and many of the streets too, all of them looking dark and sort of ominous.*

It's not a depressing city really, but on the other hand, I have yet to see any place that looks at all cheerful except the outdoor in the sunlight—and even that gets very harsh and blinding at noontime, like looking down First Ave, for a cab in the sunshine after it's snowed.

And the ship, the black freighter disappears out to sea. And on it is me.

O.

Part II

Bombs: Gray

1999

But for our poetry—the poetries of all of us—to become equal to a time when so much has to be witnessed, recuperated, evaluated, we as poets, we as readers, we as social beings, have large questions to ask ourselves and each other.

-Adrienne Rich

The tear, half,
the sharper lens, movable,
brings the images home to you.

-Paul Celan

Soft Targets

This space doesn't belong to words,
nor does it belong to a piss sword
coded across brush stroke black.

The way red loves yellow
is with slit wrists and cluster bombs,
psychodrama and brash sentimentality.

With my stare in this flat house I can
see past the curve of earth—mouthed
planets that speak the truth in gray.

And there's a certain red that stretches
across the plane like a tenderized tongue
of suckling pig, or is it the lip of a river,

a drawn-out smile to the south. Loving flows
there with hot yellow shrapnel in its bed—
the hotness like the peak of a roof in June.

This space belongs to a cum-death cli-
mactic river, a whammy-bar whim of sex set
out under crashed starlet night, undressing.

Here space is tangled, a memory of
a hand more than a face, the poise
of a lip rather than a smile,

one eye's gaze and not the other.

Rash

What millennium is it outside?
-Boris Pasternak

A pair of boots is more valuable than Shakespeare.
-Leo Tolstoy

Look at these characters;
they are only the edges of cloud banks.
And here with a house on fire
we warm ourselves, stick
our fingers into the coals until
they glow and we merrily burn
our names into a sky that's
hailing sparks from burning trusses.

My life in Dark separated from the character—
Where do I, with the play in my hair,
draw a sunset of that place where unwelcomed
flowers are peppering someone's skin?

Bomb. In the night.
It is here, inside the cup,
a mumble. Beats at night shook
the rafters; liquid was disturbed.
Drinking was here and spilled
over onto the intimate maps.
The flowers are growing.
Inside the cup I fingertip
the rim and sing. I am swallowed,
drunk by my own concert.

Tell me what a poem like this
can do for no one.
Oh boot, fleeing,
print the soil, spell me.
Stop.
It.

Part III

The Possibilities of Stars

1995-96

We are all star stuff harvesting starlight

-Carl Sagan

The Possibilities of Stars

-for Jela. Beograd, 7/95

I.

How old was that hand that tapped
me like a tree limb weighted with a child's foot
and a book of ballads?

I turned my head to see those ardent, goat-milking hands
creased like the old letters and black&white photos I found
in the garage one summer. A rotting roll-top desk.

And *yes*, I wanted tea on a tray with a tiny cup and a saucer,
a tiny scream for youth in the tree that picks
a leaf and tears it down the vein, places it
to mark the page.

Eyelids fold like letters;
the smell is green stars.

I can't look up, only read her hands.
Yes, I want a hard roll with cold butter and dry beef;
I want a plain thought to admire grandmother essence fully....

II.

But through the wooden shades
the light bends in patterns onto chipped
marble and throw rugs like asterisks,
the first stars I learned to make
and then put them in every picture
until age eleven, when I became able
to make a five point without lifting
my pen from the page.

One night in the apple tree behind the house on
711 Roosevelt reading by moonlight
I saw the shadow cast of my hand
on the worded page, folded my fingers in between
each other loosely, and found I could make black
asterisk stars with moonlight and its absence.

III.
The apartment was left unclaimed when Tito died
and the pre-WWII owners were given back their property.
Grandmother didn't have to hide in the green
bedroom off the kitchen and hold
her family in stifled breath.

Yes, now I am tired,
I say to her hands that she clasps together
as if in prayer, puts them to her ear,
tilts her head in a sleep motion.

I go and rest in the lime green bedroom off the kitchen....
I get on my knees, resting my elbows on the windowpane.
I cannot sleep. The shades have been pushed open
and my jaw is held in my palms as I breathe out over Beograd
to thick lampshade faces and gypsies
wiping the streets with work horse cadences.

An accordion brings back the nation around
every corner with a hug and a squeeze.
The city sweats war out of every brick in beads
that drip into brows of grass
and seep into the cracks of the sidewalks.

The faces dulled in dusk market voices
sing dirges to rotten fruit and day's end.
Swallows are mud-happy clapping their hands,
swooping down like ribbons,
slapping faces so everyone knows the last
bit of light before the west swallows it.

And a breeze rises from the river Sava
and blows the lampshades free,
down the streets, bouncing off walls,
breaking windows and waking light
like the starry eyes of neglect in the night.

IV.
At thirteen I found that stars weren't really shaped
with points or lines; they were like big circles
with flames and explosions and the sun was a star
and that the moon shadow that made my hands look like stars
came from sunlight which was starlight and I was afraid
maybe that meant day and night were the same and then
maybe I wouldn't be the same.

V.
The stacks blow sulfur kisses to the moon
and the gypsy woman screams at the whispers
of shattering glass. I'm sure
she is a whore, but she made rain come—
gave street lamps a purpose.

I'm choking now from dust as I fluff my pillow.
I clench my throat and look out through the window
at the largest moon I have ever seen.
I curse the ferry dust reflection from a neglected pillow
and the whore and the accordions—
my dizziness, my magic.
The rusty iron on the balcony is camouflaged
against the stars of night, twinkling dust,
and a gypsy's sequins.

VI.
And at fourteen there were stars
in my pants, binary silver ones.
select school girls had them too,
but theirs were blinking,
and aunt Holly at seventeen was a supernova.
My mother was exploding in the night
bouncing off bedsprings.

Soon I learned the metaphors of stars
and didn't have to make shadows on the page.
I could use words to make constellations
without ever saying "star."

VII.
I slept in the room with voices and the grandmother
tapped saucers together in a sink full of water
like chips of flint.

And there were sparks in the little storms behind my eyes.

Part IV

Aftermath: A Broken Siren That Speaks a Foreign Tongue

1999

He speaks truly who speaks in the shade
-Paul Celan

Evil propels me, and reform of evil propels me….I stand indifferent
-Walt Whitman

1
In a Mini-Bus with a Serbian Geologist En Route to Belgrade

8/4/99
It's light out now. 6:00 p.m. There's a yellow glow everywhere, like when the film's not processed correctly. Women with scarves sell watermelons near the narrow road.

"No politics," he says. We talked about the old black shale in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He said the rock off of Manhattan is older, 2 ½ billion years. And without a history and raw fingers, I fidget the black vinyl of my seat. I eat my own pause.

Everybody's talking Serbian now—I'm looking out the window, wondering at the honey light. The Hungarian countryside is nice, mostly poplars and some kind of scrub oak. Passing through a small community. Clay shingles, houses of cracked stucco or broken mortar brick, and wooden fences, every single house has a fence with immaculate paint. I can smell the shade of trees, cigarettes. Wow—beautiful female hitchhikers going toward Budapest in platform shoes, standing wide and sure. Older women carry reusable burlap bags. Their men wear dirty chinos and stand near automobiles and draft horses. Spit.

From the airplane it looked like most of Hungary had been cleared of trees. (There is a trailer in front of us with a horse loaded in backward.) The geometry of the farm plots was smaller and more random than those in Wisconsin.

Fence. Serbian pop music is playing and we're smoking. I ask what kind of rocks are in Serbia. He says the kind that are good for throwing and building. It's a light charcoal outside now

but I'm still squinting. It is nice and I think about the sleek neck of the horse from the trailer, good for hugging. We fill up on gas. The border will be soon.

2
I Have Every Reason to Believe I'll Get Better at This.

8/4/99
At the border the queue is short. I make out the Cyrillic characters to pass time. There isn't much light and my eyes are straining. Something of an identifiable emotion is felt. I can't give it a name but it moves me like a child singing from around a corner. There is an intensity in the sound of the idling engine. I smoke more cigarettes

than ever in this mini-bus with the geologist and the two young drivers. One driver is lying down trying to nap in the back of the bus. We were two passengers short in Budapest so there was extra room. I can see his reflection in my side window. He isn't sleeping. His eyes are looking straight at the ceiling. He takes off his glasses and continues to stare into the blurry darkness. He will have to get up soon, we are moving up in the line. A girl passes everybody in the queue on her bicycle. She has a plastic bag full of breads hanging from each handlebar. The guards must know her.

In the distance is a flooded field. There is a humid chill. I don't mind it. It's like when I ride my motorcycle the back way down Webster Dr. next to the bay and my nose is cold and my eyes water and the tears get my temples all wet.

3
The Woman with Bread in Her Hands

8/4/99
At the flooded border the driver turns to the backseat and says, *welcome to hell*, but I'm thinking of loving Ljiljana in the dark stone stairwell of *Zagrebačka* 6. We pass through without problems waved on by an adolescent in fatigues. The locals are everywhere

wandering back and forth across the border. An elderly woman stops us and beckons for a ride to the next town. The young drivers say no. Everyday she must ask, and everyday these young drivers say no in the name of their passengers. But I want her to board, we have plenty of room. I think she offered some bread. It looked so fresh, uncut, offered under a harsh cone of streetlight that interrogates the darkness. As we drive off, I lose sight of her face. Only her scarf tied in a knot under her chin is lit in the streetlight. As we distance ourselves from the border more cones appear and fade subtly into a cosmology of lights that were. And I realize

this isn't hell, it's only night has fallen.

4
Little Saturday

8/4/99
We are approaching the first city beyond the border now. A white sign with black letters spells *Subotica*. I read it as the prefix *sub* and an ominous *otica*, some odyssey of brass bands and accordions that will follow me through the streets like the ass end of a Balkan history. It is beyond black in my *otica*. The headlights of the minibus break the darkness with bumpy strobes.

A young couple waits near a bus stop, a mutt with saggy teats enters from a gap-toothed fence. Maybe a gaping moon behind that cloud over there. I record these notes onto paper

in a nervous darkness guided by memory of where my pen should be. I hope I can make out the scribble when I see it in light.

Two men pull a wooden-wheeled grain cart. A broken traffic signal.We have driven

into the fold of sub-landscape. I smooth the blackness with the back of my hand as I wipe my breath from the window, but I think I like the mist better, the way it cracks light like a sparkler. My mouth gapes in the black like that moon behind the cloud. I exhale at the window and nobody knows how loud I am screaming. I am screaming really fucking loud.

There was the same brief strobe of headlights, the dizzying of this and this beyond the fold: Drunk at an Upper Michigan bonfire party engulfed in the twirl of notes blasting out the hatchback of a Ford and I lay in the giant drops of dew-night, screwing in the grass. It was Saturday. Saturday. And it bled black like a swollen blackberry.

5
Artaud Said "All True Freedom Is Dark, and Infallibly Identified With Sexual Freedom Which Is Also Dark, Although We Do Not Know Exactly Why."

8/5/99
The whole trouble lies in words—what have I left out and what do I owe to "saw." The first

beat here approaching the Sava is always the cruel moon with its bleeding fist striking the cataract of sight. Highway narrows into a thin marrow of city. Karadjordjeva Street. I thought Belgrade would come at me like a damaging punch to the gut knocking out my wind, but leaving me pretty. Instead it yanks at my genitals. I don't want to be reduced to the "theme of the dark passage." I don't think I want to come out of this. In this city I will reside swollen.

There is the police station and the blue-and-white Skala 55s with the single sirens; the short-sleeved officers with cheap shoes, flagging people down. Trams are beaten, bruised red, and hobble down the tracks to long lines of people: the scarved pious,

the couple (the long-legged woman in platform shoes and her jet black-haired young man in Italian loafers), the one with books tucked under the arm who goes home to a dim lit room to try and make sense of all this, the evening ultimately ending with a hand cupped between the legs and pulling.

I have forgotten that I am traveling in the mini-bus with three other men. I have forgotten that I am to be a guest. I sit up, straighten my hair, and prepare to connect the faces with the names, all the while thinking that couple may twist under a night sheet, coming.

33
Me—
—To Play

8/24/99
Ever since the fontanelles there has been our drunk hugging game and the mini-bus driver waiting to take us away from all that loveliness, the perpetual toasting of bottle-necks in a small side-street littered with silver-hooded dumpsters and cracked-up cars. And I know I'm only protein. We live out this moment in any time, the moon a dollop of yogurt in a sliced spiced meat sky. What has been built here? What fountain have I stopped-up and now the flood, oh the flood of Slivovitz all over. Between my blink I'm inside that letter S, where we speak around the topic, describing the room rather than the situation at hand. Until someone shines a light. We turn toward the opaque wall. We all have crayons. Lines are drawn. None straight. Everyone fails to compose a traditional window; instead there are only portholes. Zero, zero, and zero. The water is deep. Down the hall, driving sounds—I don't doubt love is made. Failed attempts at circles or neglected truths about the origins of hellos and goodbyes. Blink. Vladimir holds a bottle high and shoves another behind the driver's seat. It's finished, we're finished. (pause.)
I'm an antibody in an antigen night. I pull open the door and crawl into the bus. Oh what a machine. There is a heart in my head. Dripping. Another revving is at hand and pulling away I don't know who is watching who perform and I've given up on pronouns, but this…this….thing is perfect. Three kisses to the cheek. Nearly finished. (pause.) There'll be no more speech. (pause.)

Three kisses to the cheek and each meat-tender soft spot.